Fear, and a ten-year-old's ability to conquer it, form the basis of the novel *I'm Not Scared*.

*I'm not Scared* is about being scared. Niccolo Ammaniti's award-winning novel is an exploration of the way in which fear is a part of our everyday lives from childhood through to adulthood.  
Equally, it reveals the importance of overcoming those fears, which hinder our progress towards moral maturity.  
From the outset we are confronted with the fears of a small group of children in a southern Italian hamlet. The combination of its isolation, poverty and hopelessness leads the narrator, Michele, to observe it was "that place forgotten by God and man". While this makes it "safe" for the children to play without so much as a passing vehicle, it also produces a hatred of the lives of the inhabitants and a desire to find a way out at any cost. Teresa pleads with her son: "When you grow up you must go away from here and never come back."  
While the adults hide away behind the doors in the mercilessly scorching summer sun, the gang of children climb, burrow, hide and play. As an undercurrent to their normal daily activities, each one cradles and attempts to cope with everyday childhood fears.  
Barbara Mura is so frightened of "being left on her own" that she endures physically demanding challenges that are often designed by the "sadistic" Skull for her to lose. She is then confronted with the most humiliating "forfeits" requiring her to expose herself to the others but somehow the daily taunts and abuse are not as terrible as being alone.  
While we are appalled at her treatment, we still admire the strength and, at times, dignity she demonstrates.  
The Natale household appears to be full of anger and hostility towards the world. From Italo, the father, who flies "into a rage" when he is unhappy with his sons, to Felice, who is the most despicable character in the novel.  
"Life (is) hell" for the children when Felice is around. His spitefulness includes verbal torment, threats, puncturing their ball, stealing and physical assault. The narrator offers us an insight into Felice's life as "friendless, womanless" and someone whose "soul (is) in torment" but this does little to assuage the fear he elicits. It does offer an understanding of the capacity some have for malevolent cruelty.  
His younger brother, Skull (Antonio), seems to have learned the lesson well. Afraid of losing power over the others, he dominates them with fear and intimidation. He feels he must "give orders" and turns "nasty" when he is challenged or disobeyed. Like so many bullies, Skull is a victim of his brutality, secretly despised, paranoid of others and basically a lonely person.  
There seems to be something in their basic characters that make the Natales cruel and sadistic, leaving Felice capable of bragging he is prepared to "slit (the kidnapped boy) open like a lamb". We cannot help but think of him when Michele's father offers ominous advice. "It's men you should be afraid of, not monsters."  
Michele is the narrator who skilfully tells his story with short, staccato sentences, taking us into the mind of a nine-year-old with striking simplicity. His fears are enunciated and represent the fears of most children. The dread of monsters, werewolves, ogres, witches and ghosts appear throughout the story.  
It is a mark of Michele's nature that he comes to terms with these fears in his own way. He outlines his intricate story of luring the "gypsies, fox-like creatures that walked on hens' feet" and all the others onto a bus. "At this point I imagined that my stomach opened up, a long cut gaped apart and they all walked happily into it." He then only has to hold his hands on his stomach and he won't have nightmares.  
Unfortunately, as he learns more about Filippo Carducci, the kidnapped son of the Lombard businessman, his nightmares shift to the reality of his own living world. His loss of innocence and world of betrayals are distressing and difficult lessons. "Papa was the bogeyman. By day he was good but at night he was bad."  
Having lost trust in the adults around him, Michele must look within for moral direction. It is the heroic actions of this pre-teen in conquering his fears in order to save the life of Filippo that sets him apart from others in the novel. His journey towards moral maturity compels him to disregard vows made to his corrupt father and imperil his own life.  
Children should be able to trust their parents to protect them from fears. But in Aqua Traverse, the adults have an agenda of their own. They have dug themselves into a hole where there is no way out. Their pathetic justifications and vague excuses that Michele is too young to understand demonstrate the moral chasm between the child and his parents.  
Associations with career criminals such as Sergio Materia and disingenuous notions of "a better life" have left them morally bankrupt. They have lost their humanity. Pino declares, "Two ears we'll cut off. Two," after hearing a heartfelt plea from Filippo's mother on the television.  
While Michele deems his father the "servant" of Sergio, "king of the gypsies", he still has faith in his mother. Teresa is perhaps one of the most interesting characters in the novel. It is beyond belief that she could be complicit in the kidnapping of a boy the same age as her own son. Yet she appears so submissive to her husband that she cannot rebel against the evil and ends up sitting in front of the television with "a vacant expression on her face". Only when Michele is assaulted by Felice does she put up a fierce fight in which she attacks "like a lioness", later threatening Pino. "If he touches Michele again I'll kill him and then I'll kill you."  
Nevertheless none of the adults can dissociate themselves from their complicity in the kidnap and proposed murder scheme. Felice does return to the house for another meeting of the gang and we never again see Teresa step outside her role of provider and supporter for her husband, despite the emotional toil it takes on her. "She had rings round her eyes, her hair was dishevelled and she looked worn."  
When the carabinieri circle in helicopters, the fear of the grown-ups is palpable. This fear compels them to respond in the most desperate and extreme fashion. After turning on one another, they callously determine that self survival can come only through murdering the helpless child.  
By employing this role reversal, where parents do not protect children and it is the child who is forced to make moral decisions, Ammaniti demonstrates that it is not simply a matter of age but more an essential character trait that helps determine the right path. The simple, childish phrase, "I'm not scared", offers profound hope for conquering fears that obstruct true moral development.  
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**FURTHER READING AND VIEWING**